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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project to create and integrate an institutional research function into the executive-level policy decision making process at a private university. The paper identifies ten problems that needed to be overcome; they include: timeliness, consideration of qualitative factors, the limited scope of institutional research analysis, data privacy, data and processes that are subject to manipulation, a bad track record, an orientation to outside agencies, the need for extensive use of information technology, use of jargon, and old data. Recommendations offered include: becoming competent in policy debate, developing a power base, basing research agendas on issues faced by policy makers, increasing the level of environmental scanning, participating in the strategic planning process, establishing collegial linkages with faculty, watching for warning signs of institutional ineffectiveness, and developing ways to make tough choices. The paper sees institutional research as a way to help policy makers concentrate on areas of strength and high student demand, forge multidisciplinary networks to streamline and restructure curriculum, assure a viable admissions policy, make sure academic programs meet changing demands, maintain adequate financial reserves, and examine internal process for efficiency and effectiveness. (Contains 22 references.) (CH)

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Positioning Institutional Research as a Major Player in Policy Decisions: Problems to Solve, Actions to Take

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for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

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Dolores Vura
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Positioning Institutional Research as a Major Player in Policy Decisions: Problems to Solve, Actions to Take

Abstract

This paper reports the difficulties of integrating the Institutional Research function into executive level policy decision making at a private university. The reporter is a 20-year veteran analyst and strategic planner assigned to the President's office who was charged with creating and employing an university Institutional Research function. The paper identifies the ten problems that needed to be overcome, provides means to assess the prospects of success at other universities, and offers suggestions for making Institutional Research a major player in policy analysis and decision making.

The paper also suggests that inconsistencies may exist between the theory and the pragmatics of the Institutional Research profession. The theory base is empirically based and inductive: practical considerations of policy making may dictate an approach less reliant on research and more oriented toward deductive reasoning processes.

Introduction

In 1995 the president of the Association of Institutional Research concluded that the Institutional Research profession faces a dilemma of focus. It could choose either policy analysis or technological competence, and opined that the future of Institutional Research rested in policy analysis (Sanford, 1995). Unfortunately, after four years of work by administrators positively predisposed toward both Institutional Research and its potential contribution to policy making, our university had been unable to make Institutional Research an effective contributor to senior-level strategic decision making. Why this disconnect between our frustrating experience and the noble and valuable path laid out by the AIR president? It was not from lack of will or resources. Our Institutional Research office had the full backing of the university president and was generously funded. It was not from lack of planning or capability. Outside experts were consulted and experienced staff were employed.

We have come to the conclusion that perhaps the reasons lie in the Institutional Research function itself; that its culture, traditions, methodologies, and priorities are not amenable to participation in top level decision making. We are not alone in our conclusion. In a study of Institutional Research offices within 243 New England colleges and universities, Delaney reports that only a small minority were conducting planning and policy studies and that Institutional Research studies were generally not conducted for the highest level decision makers. Institutional Research staff that tend to be involved in policy development, if at all, are those with established Institutional Research functions of both larger and more qualified staff at private institutions (1997).

Relationship between Institutional Research and Policy Analysis

As noted by Frost, policy analysis is a higher order Institutional Research function and follows from a mature and perhaps sophisticated Institutional Research capability (1994). Nonetheless, we must conclude that the linkages between Institutional Research and policy analysis/decision making can best be described as weak even at large institutions. Even so, there is a question as to whether or not the Institutional Research function is oriented toward policy making at all. For example, Whiteley (1992) takes a pedestrian view of the Institutional Research function, defining its "bread and butter" issues as student (persistence, enrollment management, impacts on students); faculty (demand and compensation); and institutional (program review, TQM, diversity, environmental scanning, cost analysis and peer institutions comparison). Few of these could be categorized as anything more than peripherally relevant to policy making. As noted by Matier, Sidle and Hurst (1995), "Unfortunately, what seems like an ever increasing proportion of data collection, analysis, and disseminating efforts is targeted at requests that appear tangential to what is important and relevant to the institutions.."

Of course, the involvement of Institutional Research in executive level decision making may be situationally dependent. Surely the financial position of the school (the reliability of its earning stream and its variability, its tuition revenue/enrollments and the availability of exogenous funding) are important. The stage of development (entrepreneurial, innovative, bureaucratic, or declining) is also critical. The character of decision making in academe is also relevant. For example, university Presidents tend to have less power than their corporate counterparts because subordinates have a strong influence on their selection (Brock and Harvey, 1993). He or she is a coordinator of a decentralized power center rather than a policy maker.

Also, higher education's use of strategy lags behind that of business both in scope and in sophistication (Chaffee, 1988). Weakness of Institutional Research in policy analysis may reflect the fact that strategy and policy are not done well in higher education. Higher education is constrained in its ability to change. There are specific constraints on a university's range of options. In fact, Chan contends that Institutional Research has a role to remedy this weakness by evolving higher education's strategic planning processes into more sophisticated forms (1993). On the other hand, the trends toward greater decision making complexity in higher education, for public accountability and for participatory decision making, may be favorable toward greater Institutional Research involvement in policy making (Matier, Sidle and Hurst, 1995).

Leader characteristics are also important. A willingness to be influenced by others, competence, and a respect for the culture will more likely foster an openness to Institutional Research input. Also, a leader who promotes free flow of information, is associated with outcomes, has a high degree of involvement, and is committed to the institution will surely be more receptive to Institutional Research input to the decision making process (Fujita, 1994).

Weak Linkages

Our experience has identified ten weak links between Institutional Research and policy research. These are listed below:

1. Institutional Research studies are not timely. There is a short decision cycle in policy analysis, yet Institutional Research suffers from a tradition of lengthy and time consuming analyses (for example, the proposed learning outcomes assessment plan would take five years to produce the first meaningful result).

2. Qualitative factors are not considered. Subjective inputs are important to the President, political dimensions are significant, others have inputs which are valued. Yet they have little place in the Institutional Research analyses. In fact, their consideration is viewed as an assault on research process integrity.

3. The Institutional Research analysis is limited in scope. There is little or no environmental scanning. The function is insular and unaware of dynamic competitive and political forces.

4. Institutional Research data is not private. Policy analyses are sensitive and may signal strategic intent in competitive/political environment; they should not be disclosed prematurely.

5. Institutional Research data and processes are amenable to manipulation. They can be influenced by hidden agenda. Institutional Researchers have a responsibility to ensure data and methodological integrity (Kinnich, 1994). Yet the Institutional Research data collection and analysis are amenable to manipulation.

6. Institutional Research has a bad track record. For example, the emphasis on peer institution comparative studies, considered by some to be an essential Institutional Research task is not shared by senior decision makers. Most Presidents agree with E. Grady Bogue when he stated, ". . . excellence results not from imitating another institution or individual, but from reaching for and discovering one's own promise and distinction . . . " (1994).

7. Institutional Research is oriented to outside agencies. It seems to be driven by state bodies and accrediting agencies. The function overvalues the contribution of outside systems to enhance its power base. The resulting compliance orientation is not helpful. The decision maker would prefer that the Institutional Researcher have a problem solving mind set.

8. Institutional Research requires extensive use of information technology(IT). In most cases, the investment is not worth the improvement in the quality of decision, or time, or effort.

9. Institutional Research talks in Institutional Research jargon, not the decision maker's language. There is jargon of method, jargon of organizations and reports, and jargon of IT.

10. Institutional Research data is old; it doesn't anticipate the evolution of issues. For example, marketing and admissions are central components to any college strategy (Townsley, 1993) yet there are virtually no studies by Institutional Research of the efficacy of these components.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations for the consideration of the Institutional Research professional:

- Become competent in the skills required to participate in the policy debate. These may not be traditional Institutional Research skills, rooted in the quantitative disciplines. In fact, the development of these competencies may require a fundamental shift in our world view from an empirical analysis to an interpretive one (Hathaway, 1995).
- Develop a meaningful political power base built upon recognized expertise and the confidence of policy makers.
- Determine the Institutional Research agendas from issues faced by policy makers and predict what analytical needs will derive from these agendas.
- Increase the priority of environmental scanning. It is often neglected and is an important ingredient to policy analysis.
- Participate in the strategic planning process. It is a direction setting activity that can be impacted by rigorous analysis.

- Position Institutional Research organizationally for maximum impact.

- Concentrate Institutional Research work on activities that are most valuable to policy makers. Lower the resources allocated to others.

- Establish collegial linkages into the faculties, in particular those of higher education and management where issues of policy and strategy are objects of daily discussion.

- Assess the leadership style and management processes of senior policy makers. Provide inputs compatible with their styles and processes.

- Create the "red lights" on the dashboard. These are the warnings of serious trouble in organizational effectiveness. They could include such indicators as:

  Enrollment declines of greater than 5%

  Plant maintenance deferrals of greater than 50%

  Faculty sentiments toward organized opposition (strikes, no confidence, votes?)

  Increasing student dissatisfaction.

  Unfavorable press articles about the university.

  Loss of focus in course/program offerings.

  Breakdowns in administrative systems.

- Develop means to make tough choices. Presidents would prefer to make decisions about reductions and cutbacks on centrality to mission, quality of programs, student demand, and relevance to a strategic plan rather than let bargaining and conflict determine which programs are politically vulnerable (Barrow, 1996).

- Shift studies from mere reporting to timely research on pressing issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a pressing need to mold agenda priorities, decision methods and information needs of the leader. Institutional Research can help the policy maker in

- concentrating on areas of strength and on areas of high student demand,
- forging multidisciplinary cross departmental networks to streamline and restructure our curriculum. (Barrow, 1996).
- assuring that our admissions process is active, creative and procedurally sound.
- determining whether or not our academic programs are sensitive to changing demands,
- researching the issue of how large a financial reserve is adequate
- and, examining whether or not our internal processes are efficient and effective (Townsley, 1993).

When this is the agenda of the Institutional Research function it will assume its rightful place in the policy making process.

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